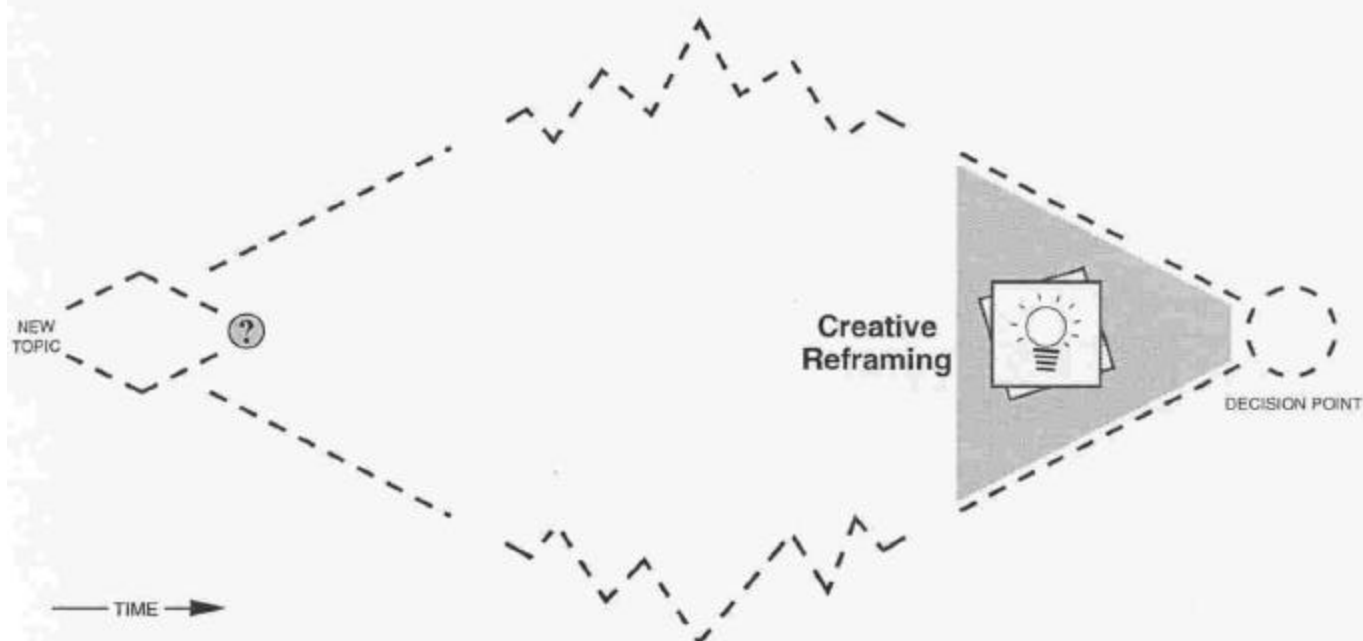


CREATIVE REFRAMING

CONVERGENT ZONE THINKING ACTIVITY TYPE 2



Creative Reframing activities – like those presented on the pages ahead – invite group members to break out of their normal categories of analysis and re-examine their beliefs and assumptions. These activities require participants to make deliberate mental shifts in order to look at a problem from a completely different angle. Making these shifts can lead group members to see choices to which they were blind, just moments before.

Because it is counterintuitive and “unnatural,” creative reframing is a type of thinking that rarely happens spontaneously. Nonetheless a facilitator can also use informal techniques to help participants shift their thinking. For example, you could ask questions like, “Is that the only way to do such-and-such?” or “Suppose such-and-such had never happened; would that change your choice of action?” These are simple questions that can be proposed with relatively little forethought. By comparison the structured thinking activities that follow are more elaborate. Either method works.

TWO WAYS OF LOOKING AT THE SAME PROBLEM

PRESENTING PROBLEM	REFRAMED PROBLEM
It's them.	It's all of us.
It's a problem.	It's an opportunity.
Our goal is unachievable.	We don't have our goal broken into realistic steps.
Our product won't sell.	We're trying to sell our product to the wrong people.
We don't have enough resources.	We are wasting the resources we do have.
We need to gather more input.	We need to pay more attention to the input we're already getting.
Our employees are incompetent.	Our employees don't have enough time to do a quality job.
We don't have enough money.	We haven't figured out how to find new sources of money.
We can't get along with each other.	We haven't made the commitment to work through our feelings toward one another.
We don't have any power in this system.	We haven't found our leverage points in this system.
We don't have enough time to do all of these things.	We have to decide what to do now, and what to do later.

CREATIVE REFRAMING

**INTRODUCING REFRAMING TO A GROUP****WHY**

Once someone perceives a problem in a particular way s/he may find it difficult to see that problem in any other way. Our minds tend to lock into a pattern of thought. For example, many job recruiters routinely decline to hire a talented applicant because of the applicant's dress or appearance; yet this habit persists even when recruiting for technical positions, when appearance would have no impact on performance.

When tackling difficult problems, most people reach conclusions quickly. They believe they have explored every option for a solution and that it would be pointless to waste more time. The idea that it might be possible to reframe a problem – that is, to dramatically alter their understanding of the nature of the problem – is, for most people, a paradigm shift.

Thus, when a facilitator decides to encourage a group to undertake a creative reframing process, s/he often finds that the main challenge is to motivate people to invest the time. This tool is designed to help facilitators overcome that initial wall of resistance.

HOW

1. Hand out copies of the facing page, *Two Ways Of Looking At A Problem*.
2. Ask people to discuss the differences between a presenting problem and a reframed problem. Remember that many people will be thinking about this concept for the first time ever; as part of digesting a new idea they may say things that sound rigid or naive. Expect remarks like, "As far as I'm concerned, this whole idea is ridiculous." Remember to honor all points of view and remain supportive throughout the discussion.
3. After several minutes say, "Now let's apply this theory to our own situation. Could someone please state *our* presenting problem?" Write the presenting problem on a flipchart. Then ask the group to brainstorm a list of *reframes* of the problem. Record all answers on flipcharts.
4. After the brainstorm, encourage members to discuss the implications of their new ideas. Say, "As you look over the list, what are your reactions?"

CREATIVE REFRAMING

**WHAT'S UNCHANGEABLE ABOUT THIS PROBLEM?****WHY**

Habits of thought are as hard to break as habits of any other kind. Suppose, for example, that someone thinks his/her boss is afraid of confrontation. That person may find it very difficult to change his/her opinion – even if the boss has actually changed.

Entire groups fall into these habits of thought, too. For example, a management team had to refill a specific staff position five times in less than a year. Yet every time they lost another person, the managers simply recruited someone else for the job and crossed their fingers. Not till the end of the year did they consider re-organizing the department and doing away with that job altogether.

"What's Unchangeable About This Problem" allows a group to explore hidden assumptions and biases in the way they have defined a problem. Once a group has identified a self-limiting assumption, they often discover a new line of thought that leads to a creative, innovative solution to their problem.

HOW

1. At the top of a flipchart, write "What's unchangeable about our problem?"
2. List everyone's answers.
3. Ask the group to look over the list and identify any hidden assumptions biases. Encourage open discussion.
4. Based on these insights, list any aspects of the problem that may be changeable after all.

CREATIVE REFRAMING

KEY WORDS**WHY**

Everyone makes assumptions. People often take it for granted that everyone else is making the same assumptions about such things as the meanings of words, the likelihood that an event will occur, and the motives behind a person's actions – to name just a few. When members are unaware of differences in their assumptions, they may find it very difficult to understand each other's thinking and behavior.

For example, the director of a city agency asked her staff for input on a proposed reorganization. A few people took her request seriously, but many others treated it lightly. This caused turmoil at staff meetings until the explanation was found. Several people had heard a rumor that the director was leaving; they doubted the reorganization would ever occur. The few who worked hard to give input were those who had not heard the rumor. These differences in assumptions were never mentioned, but they influenced everyone's commitment to the task.

Key Words helps people explore the meaning of the statements they make to one another. By discussing the meanings of key words, people can identify unspoken assumptions that are causing miscommunication.

HOW

1. Have the group compose a problem statement. For example, "New computers are too expensive to purchase." Write it on a flipchart.
2. Ask group members to identify the key words in the statement. Underline all key words. For example "New computers are too expensive to purchase."
3. Have the group identify which word to focus on first. Then ask, "What questions does this word raise?" Record all responses. Then ask, "Does this word suggest any assumptions that can be challenged? For example, is 'purchase' the only way to obtain new computers?"
4. Repeat Step 3 for each key word. Note: Encourage open discussions throughout this activity.

This tool was inspired by an exercise called "Lasso" in *How To Make Meetings Work*, M. Doyle and D. Straus, New York: Jove Books, 1982.



CREATIVE REFRAMING

TWO REFRAMING ACTIVITIES**REVERSING ASSUMPTIONS**

1. Hang a sheet of chart paper titled, "Assumptions About This Problem."
2. Have the group list its beliefs about
 - the causes of the problem
 - the connections between different aspects of the problem.
3. Ask someone to select an item from the list, and reverse it. For example, consider an item like "We are losing our best employees." Reverse this to "We're *keeping* our best employees."
4. Ask, "How could we bring about this new, opposite state of affairs?" Encourage a brainstorm of answers.
5. Choose another assumption and repeat steps 3 and 4. When done, discuss ideas that seem promising.

A version of this activity appears in *ThinkerToys*, M. Michalko, Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1992, p. 45.

REMOVING CONSTRAINTS

1. Have the group generate constraints by asking, "What is keeping us from developing the best solution to this problem?"
2. Upon completing the list, consider each item one at a time, asking, "What if *this* were not a problem? For example, "What if we had plenty of funds available? How would we solve our problem in *that* case?"
3. Treat all answers as a brainstorm. Suspend judgment and discourage discussion at this point.
4. When finished with all items on the list, encourage the group to identify ideas that seem worthy of further discussion.

CREATIVE REFRAMING

**TWO MORE REFRAMING ACTIVITIES****RECENTERING THE CAUSE**

1. Ask the group to break the problem into its major components. For example, consider the problem of keeping public libraries open. This might divide into such components as "funding," "usage," "staffing," "civic priorities" etc.
2. Ask a volunteer to select any component. For example, suppose someone picks "staffing".
3. Treat that selection as the central cause of the problem. Ask, "How might this affect our view of the problem?" For example, suppose "staffing" is viewed as the central cause of the problem. Someone might now suggest a new approach to the problem: perhaps volunteers could help staff the library during busy hours, enabling the library to remain open with less funding.

CATASTROPHIZING**(WE'RE DOOMED NO MATTER WHAT WE DO.)**

1. Ask everyone to think about the problem from their own perspective, imagining anything and everything that could go wrong.
2. Have each person in turn state his/her worst-case scenario.
3. Encourage each new speaker to build on the previous ideas, until the situation seems doomed. Note that complaining and whining are perfectly acceptable now.
4. When the humor has subsided, have the group identify obstacles that merit further discussion.
5. Go down the list of obstacles one at a time, asking "Is *this* one capable of producing a catastrophe?" If so, ask, "What could be done to reduce its potential impact?"